





RETHINKING the Workforce Dilemma

BY STAN SOLOWAY

After years of reforms and revamped workforce training and development programs, the critical thinking and innovation skills of the acquisition workforce are ceding ground to the rigid, rules-based practices of the past. It's time to rethink how we train and develop our workforce.

Some of the key findings of the **2013** Professional Services Council (PSC) Leadership Commission Report, “From Crisis to Opportunity,” are as follows:

As reported in the December 2012 biennial PSC Acquisition Policy Survey and reaffirmed throughout the Commission’s deliberations, government acquisition leaders and younger professionals share a deep concern that, despite policy directives, proclamations, and legislative initiatives—including nearly \$2 billion in acquisition workforce development funds spent by the Department of Defense (DOD) alone since 2007—the skills and capabilities of the workforce have not improved and key skills gaps (negotiations, business risk/acumen, understanding complex IT) remain largely unaddressed.

When questioned about obstacles within the federal workforce system, the rising generation of government professionals, primarily, but not solely, in the acquisition field, report that, as a result of the government’s approach to workforce training and development, critical thinking and innovation has ceded ground to the kind of rigid, rules-based practices of the past. This trend is identified as one of the single greatest factors driving high performers out of the government and keeping other high performers from seeking government employment.¹



The report was the result of six months of interviews, discussions, and debate involving a diverse array of leaders and frontline professionals.

Reactions to the findings were interesting, to say the least. A substantial number of acquisition leaders inside and outside of government embraced them and, while uncertain how best to proceed to action, recognized the abject need for a new and more contemporary approach to the acquisition workforce challenge.

Indeed, across the U.S. federal government and throughout the private sector there is a growing sense of frustration and concern that as a new generation of acquisition professionals enters the workforce, they are being acculturated and trained in much the same mode as always, evident gaps remain unaddressed, and little or no thought is being given to a potentially vastly different future. As such, both the Office of Management and Budget and the Department of Homeland Security have begun efforts to implement some of the recommendations. Meanwhile, others argue that the workforce

is better prepared and better resourced today than ever before. But, I would argue that the frequency of that view is diminishing. In short, doesn't logic dictate that if we are experiencing similar, often the same, workforce challenges today that we did 15 or 20 years ago that whatever we've done in the interim hasn't worked all that well?

This is where the great philosopher Van Morrison has it right. To paraphrase his classic "Domino," there's no need to discuss it (anymore); it's time for a change.

The need for change is driven by more than the still-evident gaps, although their existence is itself cause for deep concern. After all, wouldn't one expect to see real improvement given the resources that have been devoted to this key need, particularly at DOD, which, in addition to the budget for the Defense Acquisition University (DAU), had access to a significant acquisition workforce development fund of nearly \$1.5 billion?

Beyond the data from the field, the need for change is driven as well by the many ways in which new technology and technology

applications are fundamentally changing the way work is done, and will likely change the face and character of the acquisition profession in the relatively near future. It is driven by the reality that the government remains woefully behind in the development and/or availability of contemporary courseware and other tools that prepare its workforce to effectively acquire services—the vast majority of what the government buys—or that recognize that the "services industry" is not a single industry but, rather, an amalgamation of sectors, each possessing its own unique attributes and dynamics. It is driven by the longstanding tendency to apply traditional models of accountability and process "discipline"² to services markets and requirements that are entirely different from those for which those models were created. And most of all, it is driven by one simple fact: Roughly half of the federal discretionary budget is expended through acquisition, yet few believe the acquisition system is performing as it can or should.

The good news is that the time is ripe for a major rethinking and refocusing. For one thing, as noted before, a growing number



GO FOR THE WIN EVERY TIME!

Prepare effective
proposals, generate
sales, and come out
on top.

This book provides you with
information based on best
practices in cost estimating—
so pick up a copy today and
start winning contracts!

Visit
**[WWW.NCMAHQ.ORG/
CM/WINNING](http://WWW.NCMAHQ.ORG/CM/WINNING)**
for more information.



Developing Winning Proposals
is a book made for contract
management professionals
and anyone involved in the
acquisition process!

LEARN HOW TO

1. Review a request for proposals (RFP),
2. Put a proposal team together, and
3. Develop detailed cost estimates you need to best satisfy your customer's needs.



of acquisition leaders recognize the gaps and younger, rising acquisition professionals are looking for development opportunities and work challenges that exercise their intelligence and critical thinking. Congress continues to search for ways to improve acquisition outcomes, and across the agencies of the federal government, serious-minded individuals charged with developing the training and education infrastructure for the acquisition workforce continue to seek new and better ways to achieve their goals. However, absent real support—indeed, real pressure—for major change, the natural tendency of the bureaucracy will be to fall back on what it knows and take only incremental steps to improve it. But incrementalism is no longer enough—it is time for the community at large to join together to force the issue and to take control of its own destiny by driving major and meaningful change.

In so doing, I suggest there are several basic tenets that should drive this movement for change. None are entirely original. Indeed, each has been raised or proposed before, in one form or another—including in the PSC report, work being done by teams of federal acquisition leaders looking at the workforce of the future, by current and former acquisition officials, and elsewhere. However, that does not make them any less important. Indeed, it is not only new answers we need; it is a new commitment. Moreover, this framework will provide the kind of agility

and flexibility that is so essential to the community's ability to adapt to the many additional changes—some known and some not—that lie ahead.

The first tenet is simple: In military parlance, we need an acquisition workforce that fights as it trains and trains for the fight it is expected and will need to wage. If the workforce is to deliver high performance, it must be given the tools, training, and support that reflect the realities of the marketplace in which they operate. Yet, again, as previously noted, most workforce training and development remains bound to traditional models and assumptions far more relevant to a hardware-dominated, single-customer market of limited commerciality. Not only do services, writ large, already amount to the majority of what the government buys, but the advent of the “as a service” business model in technology and the so-called “industrialization” of services (i.e., dramatic change in how services themselves, at all levels, are delivered, largely as the result of new technology and applications) are becoming increasingly acute across all segments of the services sector. The marketplace from which those services are and will continue to be procured is large, diverse, highly competitive, and highly commercial in nature. That is as we should want it to be, and it is essential that we prepare our acquisition professionals to operate as effectively as possible in that environment.

If this sounds familiar, it is because it was a basic theme of the acquisition reforms of the 1990s. Leaving aside for a moment the growing evidence of reform regression in recent years (that's for another discussion), the truth is that the government's organic workforce development efforts have simply not made this critical transition. And the pace and nature of the changes around us make the imperative of that transition even greater.

With all due respect to my friends and colleagues at DAU, with whom I have long had, and continue to have, a highly valued working relationship, when the PSC commission made this observation last year, some at DAU bristled. But then, as now, I posed the following questions: Today, 15 years after we began discussing the dominance of services acquisitions, is there a clearly defined curriculum (not just a few classes) for the acquisition of services at DAU or the Federal Acquisition Institute? The answer was and is “no.” Similarly, does the curriculum address in any depth how a business defines, identifies, and manages risk, which is the key to any business relationship? Again, the answer was and is “no.” In fact, several years ago, DAU asked PSC to create a module to address that central topic, which we did, but that module is rarely delivered and remains only part of an optional course.

At the same time, we are witnessing across government a worrisome default to lowest

price technically acceptable awards, which is in part the result of a workforce being encouraged to not use its critical thinking skills. It is also evidence that the workforce does not have training and tools that have developed the kind of business acumen needed to make some of the tough decisions associated with a cost-technical tradeoff. It is not that they are incapable; it is that they have not been appropriately resourced or supported. Finally, the government is launching initiative after initiative, including strategic

sourcing and reverse auctions, all built on commercial models, the ultimate success of which hinge specifically on those very same skills. But has the workforce been given the tools and knowledge to make them work as intended and to discern the important, varying ways in which those tools work, or don't work, in differing environments and circumstances? Not if they haven't had high-quality and extensive training in good business practices, prominently including how complex technology is changing, negotiat-

ing skills, risk awareness, and mitigation. In fact, these three skillsets are among those that have most prominently and routinely been identified as workforce gaps in PSC's biannual survey of federal acquisition leaders and professionals.

So, what to do? Why not fundamentally rethink the training and developmental model since the current model itself does not appear to be working? Why not develop new, alternative methods for developing and nurturing the business intelligence and critical thinking skills of the acquisition workforce? There is a wide array of learning tools and methods available from a range of sources that focus on developing that knowledge base and those skills. Why do we continue to assume that for the most part, it is the government that knows how best to prepare its workforce to operate at a high level in a commercial environment?

The second tenet is to make process and rules compliance an essential companion to, rather than the foundation of, workforce development. This is a nuanced but crucial point.

Today, at DOD and elsewhere, the first stage of training and development for new members of the acquisition workforce is some form of a *Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR)* "boot camp." However, most educational theories agree that this kind of approach tamps down critical thinking and feeds rigidity and risk aversion. If you've ever watched Sir Ken Robinson's "TED Talk" (the most watched TED Talk in history), in which he discusses divergent and creative



thinking, or wondered why your child is memorizing dates rather than the context of history, you know exactly what I mean. In fact, one acquisition executive told us last year that the performance of those on her team who did not go through the “boot camp” was superior to those that did. Simply put, the best way to discourage critical thinking on “day two” is to hammer home the rules on “day one.”

In short, the training and development of the acquisition workforce should be based in a wide and exciting array of critical thinking education and development tools—many of them online and interactive—with the FAR serving as a backup and guideline, not the core. The tools are there. They tap case studies, artificial intelligence, virtual mentoring, and much more to help individuals work through problems, rather than fall back or rely on presumptions or rules. If we do not nurture the critical thinking and analytic capacity of the workforce, we have no right to expect them to exercise those skills in the course of doing their jobs. And that nurturing begins on day one.

Finally, we need to reimagine “on the job training,” which is an essential component of good professional development. Here too the government is largely out of step with best workforce practices. The acquisition workforce, which today and into the future must be able to support the full array of government missions, must have an equally broad understanding of the operations of the institution(s) they are supporting. To

accomplish that, functional rotations—taking the workforce outside of their silos and across other key functional areas—are absolutely necessary. So too, to the extent possible, are organizational rotations—moving among different organizations with different missions and mission needs—since so many acquisition professionals today support contract vehicles with multiple and varied customers. This is a practice common to the best in the commercial world. It should be very intentional and done early in a career so that by the time individuals begin to specialize, they have the well-rounded organizational perspectives and knowledge that will help them be more responsive to, and effective on behalf of, their internal customers.

There is a lot more we can and should do to support the workforce of today and of the future. Little will happen, of course, unless we are also able to build in that workforce a sense of trust that the “system,” their leadership, will support their efforts to innovate and think, and be there to back them up when things go south, as they inevitably will. It is a fundamental tenet of leadership responsibility, and requires its own renewed commitment. It is essential to the workforce itself and it is essential to the goal of clearly establishing the acquisition workforce as a critical mission priority and partner, rather than simply a support function.

I am far from alone in thinking that the need for an immediate, basic, sweeping, and sustained change in our approach to acquisition workforce development should

be clear. A new framework, a new set of tenets that guide the road ahead, can help put us on that path.

As J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote, “It’s wisdom to recognize necessity, when all other courses have been weighed, though as folly it may appear to those who cling to false hope.” Make no mistake about it—this is a time of necessity. **CM**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

STAN SOLOWAY is president and CEO of the Professional Services Council, the largest association of government technology and professional services firms. He is the former deputy under secretary of defense/acquisition reform and director of the Defense Reform Initiative. He is an NCMA Fellow and was the 2013 recipient of NCMA’s Herbert Roback Award.

Send comments about this article to cm@ncmahq.org.

ENDNOTES

1. 2013 PSC Leadership Commission Report, “From Crisis to Opportunity,” available at www.pscouncil.org/c/p/2013_Commission_Report/The_2013_PSC_Leadership_Commission_Report.aspx.
2. Such as the DOD 5000 series.